



AUGUSTE
CORTEAU

THE BOOK OF
KATHERINE

A NOVEL



PATAKIS
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The Book of Katherine

Auguste Corteau

*In the desert
I saw a creature, naked, bestial,
Who, squatting upon the ground,
Held his heart in his hands,
And ate of it.
I said: "Is it good, friend?"
"It is bitter—bitter," he answered;
"But I like it
Because it is bitter,
And because it is my heart."*

– Stephen Crane

We live in the pit of a hellhole where every moment is a miracle.

– E.M. Cioran

III Angels Only

My story begins at the end – the story's as well as my own.

It was my son who found me. On a Friday, at daybreak, five days short of his twenty-fourth birthday. He knew I was dead a once even though nothing had changed around the house; maybe because, as always, even though dead, I greeted him at the door.

It was the end of December and the radiators were working at full blast. I was lying on the bed, stark naked. I'd put on a lot of weight over the past few years, and I could tolerate neither underwear nor bedclothes – they felt stifling. Like a page out of a tragic poet of squalor and love: he was naked when I first saw him, and now, the last time he'd ever see me, I was naked as well.

After he'd assessed my deathly state at a glance, he turned to the window, thinking about whether he should open it – so that the soul of the departed could fly away, as they believed in the olden days. But absurd though it was, he didn't want me to get chilled, stripped bare as I lay. So he just stood there studying me.

If I were alive and, upon waking up, I found him staring between my big fat thighs I'd be terribly ashamed, and scramble at the sheets to cover myself. Yet now I existed beyond the possibility of shame. And it also made sense in a way, my son's fixed stare. That's where I came from, he thought. And now... Now he pictured himself as a leaf, a flower or a fruit brutally wrenched off its root. We sat and hurt together for

a while like this, and then, although he knew he ought to leave me untouched, just as he'd found me, he approached and sat next to me to clean me up.

With a wet cloth he wiped the dried bile off my chin, and raising my head on the pillow he closed my gaping mouth. Then he pushed my legs back together and covered me up with the sheet, an old one which was part of my dowry, and had sadly outlived me. And these ministrations were as tender as a poem's verses: thus once I used to wipe the drool of his tiny baby's chin, thus I covered him up when early in the morning I woke up and found him curled up in his crib without his blankie.

What ensued is of no importance. Only those precious moments, while I lay next to him, unable to put my arms around him and comfort him, and so I merely said, Cry, my baby bird. Cry to lessen the hurt. But it was too soon, at that instant it was only the otherworldliness of pain that filled his heart. He cried the next day, and years later, a thousand times as hard as he didn't cry that morning.

And so my story begins. My name is Katherine, and I died by a route obscure and lonely, for there was too much in me I could bear no longer. I died terrified and deserted, choking on my own venom. But I'm not worthy of your pity, so don't. I died by my own hand.

As befits a murderess.

The Cover-Up

It's the dawn of the twentieth century, and in Samsun, Turkey, a silent crime occurs: a woman's past is bluntly erased, and it shall remain unknown for more than a hundred years. But it's the history of this people – my people, and my son's people – is written in the blood of crime and sacrifice: a palimpsest of hate.

Her name is Sarah, and at the age of twenty-five, being poor and unmarried, she is already doomed to spinsterhood. Who would ever marry a penniless Jewess with hair as red as Judas's? And yet against all odds a man does: Dimitròs Konstantinidis, an unsuccessful textile merchant, orphaned and thus free of judgmental parents. However, in order to reconcile himself with the fact of wedding a woman who's a year older than he (and a descendant of Christ-Killers into the bargain) he asks – or, rather, demands; men rarely asked for things in those days – that Sarah forswear her true name and lineage. He might not be rich, but he's a good Christian who crosses himself and fasts during Lent (at least in public), and if he's to have a family with her he won't tolerate her raising his sons to be any less pious than their father. And so, without further ado, he renames his bride Katina, takes her by the hand, and marries her in a remote, tiny church, in a ceremony attended by a mere handful of people.

A married woman now, with a roof over her head, Sarah soon turns into Katina at heart, and churns out Dimitròs's brood – although all three children are girls, following one another like stabs in the heart: Eirini, Ariadni and Fotini. And as if it weren't bad enough, their being dowry-demanding wenches, the wretched things look as different from one another as if they were spawned by the Twelve Tribes: Eirini blond and blue-eyed, Ariadni as swarthy as a gypsy, and Fotini redheaded and freckled like her mother.

And yet, thanks to Katina's thrifty housekeeping – it turns out her unnameable origin has its benefits after all – and Dimitròs's hard work so that his daughters want for nothing, their wealth grows steadily, and at the beginning of the Nineteen-twenties the Konstantinidis family is practically well-off: the three sisters attend a good private school and have French and piano teachers, there's meat on the table every single day... God has been good to them.

And then the Asian Minor Catastrophe strikes, and all of a sudden the family is uprooted and find themselves in Thessaloniki's Upper Town, without two pennies to rub together. From a wealthy, well-respected homeowner and businessman Dimitròs becomes a 'Turk-spawn' overnight, and Eirini, who used to be first in her class, is suddenly cast amongst young Greek girls who look down on her and whisper behind her back, "Her family lives in a shack. Can you imagine?"

This shack will haunt Eirini for the rest of her days. She, who dreamt of becoming doctor, is now crouched next to the hearth to warm her freezing hands, while in the pot her meagre dinner of boiled potatoes seethes like her smarting pride. (“What’s for dinner tonight, sis?” – “Bread and teeth to chew it with”) which she has to prepare, because as if things weren’t bad enough their mother died a little after they emigrated. A public horse-drawn cart took her remains, to be buried in a pauper’s grave.

And Eirini, my mother, quenches her hunger with dreams, while her two younger sisters live in their own private worlds – literally. Although they won’t be diagnosed for decades, Fotini, the youngest, suffers from a mild form of mental retardation, while Ariadni – she of the green-eyes and the raven-black hair, a beauty sought after by prospective husbands ever since she was twelve – has begun to exhibit the early signs of the paranoid schizophrenia that will plague her till the end of her life.

A lot of hereditary illness in my family; a heavy legacy to bear. As if that first crime (the brutal assimilation of my Jewish grandmother) was now exacting Biblical vengeance on her three innocent girls. But what are you gonna do?

At least Eirini is mentally stable – though physically she’s less so. The hardships of her adolescence will cost her a lung lost to consumption and a slight yet persistent hump. Like her late mother, at twenty she’ll resemble a grown woman, and so will run into the arms of the first available suitor, preferably one who will be able to restore her to her childhood grandeur.

We were all stricken by the Catastrophe. The lives of us all were plighted by that shack.

Father's Malice

In January 1901, at a rocky village of mountainous Karditsa, my father, Minas Chorianos, is born. He's the second-born, and comes second in everything. The firstborn son, his brother Vangos, is raised with a golden spoon: first school, then the Military Academy, and finally an illustrious career in the army, where he'll be known by the triumphant moniker 'Vangos the Commie-Slayer' – whereas Minas grows up in conspicuous neglect, the rare recipient of stray caress from his Vlach mother Katingo, who spoke no Greek at all and thus led a life of muteness, and with an abundance of scorn and corporal punishment by his father, the village priest.

The last bitterness the young Minas is forced to swallow comes in the form of Communion wine – because, in order to remind him just how inferior he is, my ogre of a grandfather makes his own son receive Communion after every other villager has, amongst them an old, phthisic woman Minas despises. And so one morning – he couldn't be older than eight at the time – knocks the chalice out of his father's hands, and curses at him: "May the Devil in Hell fuck your bitch of a mother!" And with a parting gob of spit in the aghast priest's face, he leaves his homeland, never to come back.

He'll be taken in by a kind-hearted uncle, a pastry maker in Karditsa – although his kindness and hospitality do not extend to the inside of his home, so that little Minas spends the cruel winter huddled up in the freezing henhouse, and as if this hardship and the backbreaking labour with which he pays for his keep weren't punishment enough, his sleepmates give him chicken lice. For the rest of his life he'll bear these two evils in mind like the two faces of the same beast: every time he sees a priest he'll expectorate loudly on the ground, murmuring, "Go clean the chicken lice from your filthy beard, you motherfucking goat."

The twenties find him in Salonica, peddling balls of yarn, spools of thread, thimbles and other sewing paraphernalia at the open-air market, his small side-by-side with those of future magnates of Greece's second-largest city. Working sixteen-hour days, he manages to save quite a lot of money, and by 1930 he'll be the owner of a large convenience store – which will provide sustenance for generations of idlers to come... (The building, unlike its first inhabitants, still stands intact).

In 1931 my father Minas will meet my mother Eirini, younger than he by a decade, he'll fall head-over-heels in love with her, and will marry her. And what about Mrs. Eirini Chorianou? Years later – while confiding to her youngest and most troubled daughter (me), her longtime confidante since, even if she blabs, who would ever believe crazy Katherine's lies? – when I ask her whether she'd fallen in love with dad as well, she'll say, after an uncomfortable pause:

“Over the years I learnt to love him.” As if Minas were a foreign language, which she’d been forced to become fluent in bit by bit, even if she found it hard and uninviting.

Readers, doctors, look no further: therein lies the seed of all evil.

Encephalitis, They Said

In 1933 Dimitrakis is born – a blond, green-eyed, gorgeous baby. Eirini, proud mother and homeowner, had of course been furnished early on with a cleaning lady (the house overlooking Thermaikos Bay being so huge and she not terribly inclined to keeping it spotless), but following her son's birth she also acquires an au pair – a distant niece of hers from Roumeli called Zoe – to share some of the maternal burden.

She's an interesting case, Zoe is. The seventh daughter in a row, a few hours after her birth in 1924, she is placed stark naked inside a baking tin like an uncooked baby pie and is left upon the roof in order to freeze to death and free her father from the task of feeding another mouth which will eventually grow into one more dowry-devouring wench. The village priest will save her, hearing her weak whine, retrieving baby Zoe and raising him with the help of his barren wife as if she were their own.

This feat of salvation will follow Zoe her entire life like an aura of blessedness, and she will share it, along with her tenderness and love. She'll practically raise her aunt's kids all by herself, and even though she'll never have children of her own, she won't ever grow bitter or envious. My son will worship her like a second mother, and on the night of her sudden death me and my brother Agis will wake up with a leap, both of us convinced there's just been an earthquake.]

But let's go back to Dimitris, my brother whom I never met – he died at the age of twenty, a little after I was born.

During the first three or four years of his life he was an absolute angel: a baby of cherubic beauty and calm: he never cried, nor screamed – he just smiled and smiled, though he was extremely timid and reserved when it came to being kissed, caressed or otherwise touched. But even this was viewed as cute: a sort of babyish coyness.

However, at the age of five Dimitrakis still hasn't spoken a single word. And in the meantime his idiosyncrasies have gotten out of hand: if you so much as get close to him – let alone try and touch him – he starts screaming and kicking like a regular little devil. In all probability, the poor kid suffered from some form of autism. However, back then a condition like this was very hard to diagnose, and my parents didn't want the stigma of their firstborn being addled.

So my mother will ship Dimitris off to a Swiss mental hospital for children, where she'll never visit, claiming that she couldn't bear the anguish; and by then she has had more kids to care for. Only my father Minas will fly to Geneva every now and then, taking time off work which is the most important thing in his life to visit his son, his baby, who grows up into a speechless, feral-like creature. A little after his

fortieth birthday, after one such heartrending visit, he'll suffer a mild stroke which will leave a light paresis across the left half of his face.

Relatives, neighbours and miscellaneous busybodies are told that Dimitris contracted a rare case of encephalitis at the age of four, which left him brain-damaged for good.

Besides, there were more children to come.

More hidden sickness to hide.

His Eyes

If there had been one thing that had indelibly smeared the soul of the then adolescent Eirini as she saw the world around her crumble and disperse, it was the loss of beauty: their handsome two-storey house in Samsun, her luxurious clothes, the euphony of French and the songs she used to sing at the Conservatory. During her entire life she'd struggle to restore that long-lost exquisiteness – and life would go against her wishes in every possible way.

The year is 1939. In a short while Greece is going to be swallowed up by the war, yet my father won't serve in the army: initially he'll be taken care of by his brass-hat brother, who'll declare him 'father of an invalid child' and then the stroke will render him unfit once and for all. In the autumn Myron emerges from the womb – the second-born, whom, however, my mother shall always view as her firstborn: the first one she got right – that's how she pictures him as she strokes her distended belly.

But bad luck won't give the poor woman a break. Myron is born with a full head of thick back hair, and with a case of strabismus just as striking. In vain does the doctor try to assure her that this flaw may correct itself over time: months pass and reality is dishearteningly plain: Myron is cross-eyed.

For the first time, Papa Minas is furious with his beloved. "Two children you gave me, and they're both freaks. It's like I married into circus folk!"

Mama Rini wails and sobs. "He's your son, what does it matter if he's a bit walleyed?"

"A bit? He can look at you and me both seated at opposite sides of the room!"

And so on, and so forth. My mother categorically refuses to accept that this unfortunate finishing touch truly spoils the picture of baby perfection that Myron is: so she fattens him up like a prize pig (it'll take him long, hard years to drop his childhood flab), and shows him off to her woman friends as Nature's most sublime creation. Even when her third son, Kostakis, lays dying and wheezing in the crib, stricken by a bad case of whooping cough contracted from his older brother Myron,

her sole concern is not the moribund infant but her treasured firstborn, who's coughing his poor heart out. Kostakis is buried unmourned.

Half a century later, a few days after Eirini's death, a neighbourhood priest, hailing from the island of Tinos, will track me down to tell me that for fifty years in a row, never missing one, Mrs. Rini gave him a votive offering to take to the famous Panagia Evangelistria: a pair of big, beautiful eyes etched on a piece of silver.

"For his eyes, Father," she'd say. "For my baby's poor eyes." Even though Myron was forty at the time, and a father of two himself.

By the pricking of my thumbs...

...something wicked this way comes.

For most of the family and the world at large, wickedness is going to be incarnated in the form of my older sister Clio. I shall believe the same myself.

But now I know. It was the evil of myself approaching.

The Sinister Hand

In the spring of 1946 my brother Aegisthus is born. I wonder, did my mother know just how unfortunate a name she'd given her own son? Luckily, someone must have given her a hint, and so she cut it down to Agis.

Agis is born with a heart of gold. He will love me more than any other woman in his life, and in my eyes he'll be the man of my dreams. If you find siblings in love disturbing, you should have seen the two of us together...

But his birth isn't devoid of drama, either. Despite his blond locks and his pretty little face, Agis's blue eyes are also crossed – imperceptibly so if compared to Myron's, yet perfectly straight they are not. And since from the age of two he'll be forced to wear thick-lensed glasses (like his brother, he's very short-sighted), this slight imperfection will be magnified.

Mama Rini is by now resigned to her fate: some women bear twins, some stillborns, and she is destined to make squinters.

Even though he'll grow in the shadow of mama's favourite, Myron, Agis won't hold a grudge against life like my sister Clio will. He'll endure uncomplainingly the series of misfortunes that beset him: his lisping, the taunting and bullying of his older brother, his bad grades at school and his left-handedness, which his mother will try and beat out of him. It was Zoe who stopped her when she got too carried away with the thrashing of the poor child, though eventually he will learn to write with his right hand, something which perhaps is the root of a lifetime of academic underachievement. (And yet, decades later, I remember him playing soccer with his son, Minas, and naturally he'll be favouring his left foot. Human nature won't change, no matter how much violence it's subjected to).

Maybe my mother ought to have stopped at three – or, the way she viewed her exiled son as virtually nonexistent, at two – kids. But my father was always chasing her around to 'mount' her, even in their old age, and it seems they hadn't gotten wind of condoms.

So, in Our Lord's Year 1948, Clio is born.

Banana Liqueur

Around the age of four, a chubby, naughty and gluttonous toddler, little Clio is left unsupervised for a couple of minutes, and sneaking into the kitchen she rummages the cupboards looking for some treat – and in the back of a cabinet under the sink she finds a bottle of banana liqueur. She’s too young to read, but on the label there’s the picture of a banana, and Clio loves bananas more than anything in the whole wide world, so that the yellowish liquid seems to her ferociously desirable.

And luck has it that the bottle cap is loose, so that she manages to unscrew it. She’s already raised the bottle to her eagerly parted lips when Zoe comes upon her, and seeing her she lets out a piercing shriek and wrenches the bottle from her stubby little hands – because the bottle doesn’t contain banana liqueur but drain cleaner.

I’ll be told this story a few years later, when I’ll be already at the mercy of the tyrannical regime imposed by Myron and Clio, who, envious of my special bond with Agis, submit us to daily torments.

And I’ll keep fantasizing about a delightfully different ending to that story: Zoe walking into the kitchen too late, and my older sister thrashing and groaning on the floor while the corrosive acid eats up her insides and she’s drowning in her own blood.

Oh, us Chorianou kids really loved each other to death.

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George Pantsios, foreignrights@patakis.gr, Tel: +30.210.36.50.051